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ABSTRACT

A study explored the interaction of television families with attention to how parents behave in families and how children interact both with and without their parents and their siblings. Programs selected for the study were nine episodes of "The Cosby Show" and "Growing Pains"; both of these programs feature two-parent families with dependent children. Each episode was viewed several times serially and notes were made about all of the family interactions. Analysis in this study revolved around interactions of parents with children, children with parents, and children with their siblings. The analysis provides a picture of families in which fathers are in charge of the family life, in which there is not a great deal of distance between parents and their children, and in which siblings are not particularly supportive. Findings suggest that children modeling their behavior in families from these two programs would have certain expectations, including that: (1) fathers will work at home in a job which allows them to nurture and run a household virtually full-time; (2) while mothers are employed outside the home, the number of professional positions does not parallel the television pattern; (3) siblings are generally not supportive of each other; and (4) the lack of distance between children and parents on television may provide an unrealistic model. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (MG)

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THE PORTRAYAL OF FAMILIES ON PRIME TIME TELEVISION

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Introduction

The issue of the impact that television has on children is not new. Concern has ranged from that over the violence in Saturday morning programs, to the educational impact of Sesame Street. Concern has also been raised over the impact of television as a socializing agent. Its impact on the socialization of children has been described "as much a potential source of influence as the home environment, the parents' behavioral style, and their socioeconomic milieu" (Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984, p. 73). Mead (1978) has noted that "TV more than any other medium gives models to the American people--models for life as it is, or should, or can be lived" (pp. 10-12). Others have noted that television provides pro- and anti-social models of verbal and nonverbal behavior, (Gunter, 1984); is important in the shaping of social reality (Hawkins and Pingree, 1981); and contributes to the learning of family roles (Greenberg, 1980). Chesebro (1987) has discussed the impact of the values portrayed on television, and Watkins (1985) has noted that it not only teaches about values, it also provides information about many different aspects of the world. Thus,

the force of television as a socialization agent seems well-established.

This report concerns itself specifically with the socializing influence of television which occurs as it provides models of how families work and how family roles are played. This issue is of concern for several reasons. One reason is the resurgence of a pro-family social climate prevailing in America today which accounts for much of the success of many current family sitcoms (Ardinger & Estrin, 1986). In November 1986, four of the top ten programs in the prime time ratings were shows featuring families with dependent children (Broadcasting, Nov. 24, 1986).

A second reason for concern over television and the family is that many children look to television for models of family interaction in spite of the fact that they presumably already live in families. Stroman (1984) reported a survey in which 50% of the sample of children said they watch television so they can learn how different people behave, talk, dress and look, and that 52% of those interviewed reported learning most of what they know about jobs, decision making, problem solving, and how parents and children interact from television (italics added). It seems very likely that children in single parent families and/or

without siblings may be more interested in learning about families than those in two-parent families with more than one child. Given that 42% of white children living today and 86% of the black youngsters will spend a significant portion of their childhood and/or adolescence in one-parent homes (Kotulak, 1986), the manner in which families are portrayed is of serious concern.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe the interaction of television families with attention to how parents behave in families; and how children interact, both with their parents and with their siblings.

The programs selected for study were "The Cosby Show" and "Growing Pains." The "Cosby Show" was number one in the Nielsen ratings at the end of week eight of the prime time season in 1986, and has been lauded as high quality family entertainment. "Growing Pains" was also in the top ten in the Nielsen ratings and Kirk Cameron, who plays the 16-year-old, has been touted as "the most popular teenager in America" (Schwed). Both of these programs feature two parent families with dependent children.

In this study, first, other studies which have dealt with similar questions will be examined. Second, the method of analysis for this study will be described. Finally, an analysis and a discussion of implications of family interaction on the two prime time television programs will be presented.

Similar Studies of Television Content

Studies which have dealt with sociological aspects of television content tend to be quantitative content analyses. For example, the proportion of conventional to unconventional family configurations has been described (Skill, Robinson and Wallace, 1986), as has the depiction of various minorities, the elderly, sex role portrayal and family roles (Greenberg, 1980). A limitation of this quantitative approach, noted particularly by Greenberg, is that while the acts to be evaluated were all categorized and coded, this analysis did not allow the researchers to differentiate "the quality of the acts themselves, i.e., all acts within a mode are nominally equivalent in the findings" (1980, p. 172). He noted that he did not have a way to differentiate between acts "in terms of such attributes as act duration, strength or intensity" (1980, p. 192). In

another work (Greenberg, et al, 1980) researchers noted that their interpretations changed when the motives and consequences of acts of behavior were considered. They noted further the difficulty of assessing the intensity of acts. Two fist fights, which would be coded as "equivalent" acts may not actually be "equivalent" acts. The addition of qualitative information was recommended.

Method of Analysis: Qualitative Approach

Thus, the methodology used here is a qualitative analysis. While it lacks the replicability of social scientific content analysis, it benefits from the insights of a researcher immersed in the television texts. It allows a critic, for example, to take into account character motivation, character type and relationships between characters in assessing the interactions.

Nine episodes of each of the programs were videotaped during the 1986-87 season. Taping began with the publication of the first Nielsen ratings early in November, and continued throughout the season. After the elimination of repeat broadcasts, programs which did not focus on family interaction and programs which were unable to be taped, nine episodes were available for analysis. These were studied by

watching all of the episodes of each program several times, serially. That is, the first episode of "Cosby" was viewed and notes made about all of the family interactions, including such things as direct quotes, connotations in the language and the motivations of characters. When the first recorded episode was depleted of data, the second episode of "Cosby" was watched. "Growing Pains" was watched and analyzed only after all of the "Cosby" episodes were watched. This minimized the distractions or contamination which might occur from watching the programs alternatingly.

Family Interactions for Analysis

The interactions analyzed in this study revolved around interactions of parents with children, children with parents, and children with their siblings. An important assumption in this study is that what was presented on the screen was analyzed at face value. That is, although writers of programs vary, and scripts are sometimes written to accomodate the personal needs of actors (e.g. pregnancy), the assumption here is that those children who watch television and learn about how parents and children interact are not mentally compensating for those factors, but are processing the interaction as it occurs.

Several important questions revolved around parents. How are parents portrayed? Gitlin (1986), for example, claims that "TV discredits and detests the power to nurture, /and/ derides all household talents" (p.203). Further, that "the Dad with children of his own is often still despised, albeit gently, undercut with tittering affection" (p. 205), and that "the good Dad is nonauthoritative" (p. 206). Others note the trend toward much more nurturing, especially from fathers (Ardinger & Estrin, 1986). Will a close examination of program content produce evidence to support any of these claims?

How do parents handle the roles of household manager, especially given the employment of mothers outside the home? Do parents discipline their children? If so, how?

How are children regarded? Do they seem to be small adults as in Postman's description in The Disappearance of Childhood? How do they interact with their parents? Do they defer to them? Do they manipulate them?

How do children treat their siblings? Are they supportive and reinforcing? Or do they undercut and punish each other? Is there a hierarchy between siblings?

Programs for Analysis

Briefly, "The Cosby Show" features Cliff Huxtable (a gynecologist with an office at home) and his wife, Clair (a successful attorney, frequently away attending conferences), who have been married 23 years, and their five children: Sondra, away at college, Denise, 18, Theo, 16, Vanessa, 13, and Rudy, 8.

"Growing Pains" features the Seaver family. Jason (a psychiatrist who works from an office in his home) and Maggie (worked for Newsweek early in their marriage, now works for a community newspaper), have been married nearly 20 years, and have three children: Mike, 16, Carol, 15, and Ben, 10.

Analysis: Portrayal of Fathers

Household Managers. Both Cliff and Jason appear to be important as household managers. In "Growing Pains," meal preparation was the primary household management activity portrayed. In three of the nine episodes dinner preparations are going on. Jason is the only cook in two of them (10/21, 1/27); he and Maggie are cooking together in one (1/13). In a fourth episode, both of them have forgotten whose turn it is to cook (1/27); in another, both parents are packing school lunches (10/21).

Cliff is also important as the household manager. We see him making the bed, changing the sheets and even carrying the dirty laundry downstairs (12/4). He also cooks (1/8), and we see him bringing in the groceries, having done the shopping himself (2/19). It is Cliff, not Clair, who deals with finding the owner of a stray dog Rudy has brought home (12/4).

Nurturer. Both Cliff and Jason are very important as nurturers and caregivers. They appear to reinforce Ardinger and Estrin's description of the nurturing father. For example, it is Jason, not Maggie, who goes to Ben's school during recess because the teacher has called that Ben is having problems (10/21). He exhibits parental protectiveness when Carol's invitation to the dance is turned down by Bobby, the athlete she is tutoring. Jason refers to him as "that little slime bag sucker," and agitatedly calls him to find out why he has turned her down. He learns that Bobby has to work that night as a janitor at the Empire State Building, so Jason takes Carol there on the night of the dance to supposedly divert her from her disappointment, and the episode is resolved with Bobby and Carol dancing on the observation deck (1/27). In another instance, it is he who has carefully thought through Carol's

long-term well-being with regard to the possibility of her skipping a grade in school. While Maggie is enthused about the prospect because it demonstrates Carol's superior intellect, Jason is concerned because her social skills may not be adequate (1/13).

Cliff is also very important as a nurturing parent. He prepares and eats breakfast with Rudy (2/12). In another episode, when none of the other family members is willing, Cliff dresses up to attend Rudy's tea party. Theo and Vanessa are too busy, and Clair must go to the office. (1/29). In one episode, Theo is home on a Saturday night, dejected because Lana has not called, and everyone else is out for the evening. Cliff has plans himself, but puts those aside and suggests the first meeting of the "Huxtable men's club." Cliff says, "We'll get some black and white cowboy movies, get some Hoagies and some junk food" and enjoy ourselves (1/15). When Clair is away at a conference, Rudy climbs into bed with Cliff because she is lonesome. Soon, Vanessa and Theo have joined them and all four watch wrestling together in bed (12/4).

While there is no doubt that Cliff is important as a nurturer, his parenting is often laced with sarcasm and put-downs. When Sondra discusses her feelings for her

boyfriend, Cliff rolls his eyes and mimics her proclamations of love in a sarcastic tone (1/8/87). In another instance, several girls who are romantically interested in Theo have stopped by, and in a private moment in the kitchen, Cliff teases Theo that the girls have left. He snickers at the panic he causes in Theo. (1/15). In another, he puts Theo on about the appeal of Lana, who has "it," and as Theo is quite seriously describing her appeal, Cliff snickers behind Theo's back (1/15). When Theo has been complimented on his ability at wrestling, Cliff chooses to embarrass Theo in front of Sondra's boyfriend by dragging up his inferior record on the football team (1/8).

Disciplinarian. Both Jason and Cliff appear to be important figures as disciplinarians and as reinforcers of appropriate social behavior. In Jason, this is particularly apparent in his relationship with Mike, the high school junior. In one episode, Mike tries to gain permission to go on a ski trip by patronizing his parents who are ill. Jason dismisses the plea with, "Forget it, Mike. You're not going anywhere while you're still flunking English (1/20)." In another, Mike has finagled permission to date a stewardess. When she appears at the door, Jason simply declares that Mike cannot go out because he is too young. He does not

waver because the girl is on the front steps or because Mike technically did acquire permission from Maggie to go out (1/13). He also nags Mike about doing his homework, and refuses, in one episode, to let him go to a friend's house until his room is cleaned (12/2).

Although Mike is the child who most frequently gets in trouble, Jason does reinforce appropriate behavior when it is exhibited, and has fostered an open relationship with him. In one episode, Mike and his friends attend a party where cocaine is being used and decide to go home rather than take part. Jason is the parent waiting up for Mike, who arrives home after curfew, at 2:15 am. Jason is exasperated and not about to be fooled by another of Mike's farfetched stories--"Bet you ran into those darned gypsies again"--and demands a good explanation. Mike realizes that even though he declined the cocaine, he is in trouble because he's missed curfew, but exhibits the openness of their relationship when he says, "Can I talk to you as a friend, not as a guy who could make my life miserable?. . .I gotta know that what I tell you won't be used against me." Jason is horrified when Mike tells him that everybody was doing cocaine, but is able to reinforce Mike's positive behavior by saying, "I always figured you'd make the right

choice." When Mike expresses his fears that those kids will laugh at him, and notes that some kids did laugh at him, Jason realistically and positively replies that, "You can never please everybody--you did please yourself. What you did took courage. I admire you (2/10)."

Cliff is also active as a disciplinarian and reinforcer of appropriate social behavior. Cliff's strictness is apparent in several episodes. In one, Rudy has cut pictures out of a very expensive book to use in a school report. She and Vanessa, who was supposed to be in charge, are aware that there will be trouble. In fact, the script is so familiar, the girls finish the lines for Cliff. Cliff says, "What I want to say is those books. . ." interrupted by Rudy, "cost a lot of money!" In this instance, Cliff speaks no lines to indicate his displeasure, but it is apparent that he's upset (1/22).

In another instance, a problem is that Vanessa's friend has smoked in Vanessa's room, in spite of Vanessa's objections. Theo smells it and declares that once Cliff caught him and Cockroach smoking and "hollered so loud there are still cracks in my bedroom walls!" (2/12)

In yet another episode, Vanessa has objected to going to Washington D.C. to hear Clair speak at a professional

meeting. She mopes and is despondent for two days. Findally, Cliff edicts, "You will go to Washington to hear your mother speak, and you will be happy. In a remarkable turnaround, Vanessa smiles at him, he gives her a hug, and she hugs him back. Problem is solved.

Cliff also is important as a reinforcer of appropriate social behavior. In the smoking incident, Vanessa tells her dad, and tells him that she objected. He doesn't get upset, but rather discusses the impact of peer pressure and the importance of one's own values. Further, he states that he values her honesty in coming to him candidly rather than trying to cover it up (2/12).

Portrayal of Mothers

Household managers. Maggie's inactivity as the household manager has been exemplified in the activity of Jason. She is seen sharing in meal preparation, but not doing it alone or performing other household tasks.

With regard to household management, we do not see Clair taking an active role, either. She buys shelves for Cliff's office, but does it as a ploy to keep him occupied during a bridal shower, rather than as part of household

planning (2/26). As mentioned earlier, it is Cliff whom we see doing laundry, cooking and grocery shopping.

Nurturer. Neither Maggie nor Clair are particularly nurturing mothers. An example is Maggie's rather non-nurturing behavior in taking Ben to school on the first day, with the comment, "Don't play around. I want to meet your teacher and I'm already late for work (10/21)."

Maggie's nurturing behavior is seen primarily in her relationship with Carol. In fact, her relationship with Carol seems to encourage a male/female dichotomy in the family. Maggie is not only supportive of Carol /("You sure look nice today" (10/21), "You're sure doing a nice job helping in the house" (2/24)/, but often the support has the effect of denigrating Mike. For example, Carol and Mike have had a fight in which Carol has physically hit Mike. Mike tells his mother that Carol has been "brutalizing" him, to which Maggie gleefully replies, "That's my girl (1/27)!" She makes comparisons between the two to Carol's benefit when asking Mike if he has all his school supplies. "Your sister has her books, notebooks, and all of her supplies (10/21)." Another example of the male/female dichotomy occurs when Maggie tells Carol to be tolerant of what

appears to be a dumb plan of Jason's, saying in a patronizing tone, "He means well (1/27)."

As a nurturer, Clair is not very active, either. In only four of the nine episodes does she express concern for, or interact with, her children at all. In one, she sent a care package to Sondra, who is away at college (1/29). In another, she called from a conference she was at to ask Cliff if Theo were wearing his coat, if Rudy were wearing clean underwear every day and if Vanessa were trying to get away with wearing makeup to school (12/4). The third involved helping Denise give a bridal shower (2/26). The last involved an injury Rudy sustained during horseplay with Theo. Cliff has tended the wound, but when Clair comes home from the office, she insists that Rudy be taken to the Emergency Room. However, it is Cliff who takes her there (2/19).

Disciplinarian. These mothers do not seem particularly active as disciplinarians. In the one episode which featured Maggie as a disciplinarian, she appeared rather childish and immature. In this instance, Mike has been grounded and sent to bed at 8pm for lying about a curfew violation. Mike overhears Maggie lying about a time conflict to her boss and confronts her. Having been caught,

Maggie grounds herself. After sending Mike to bed, she sneaks downstairs to watch television. Mike catches her, and rather than send herself upstairs to bed, she relates to Mike how she sneaked out of being grounded as a teenager. Then she and Mike go out for pizza, Maggie saying, "I won't tell, if you won't (1/6)."

As a disciplinarian, it seems that Clair can be very punishing, although there was only one instance of her meting out punishment. In the episode in which Rudy is hurt during horseplay with Theo, she interrogates Theo as if he were on trial, finds him guilty, and orders him to wash all of the windows and floors in the house (2/19). It is of note that we do not see Theo doing any of these jobs.

The only example of Clair commenting on socially appropriate behavior was a lengthy and serious conversation with Denise, who has given a bridal shower for a friend who is getting married and is pregnant. Clair is highly critical of the friend's motivation to get pregnant to force her parents to give permission to get married, and threatens that if any of the Huxtable "children pulled a stunt like that /she'd/ kill them" (2/26). This commentary on socially appropriate behavior seems fraught with risks.

Portrayal of Children's Relationships with Siblings

"Growing Pains." While one might want to infer that siblings have a sense that the bottom line is that "siblings stick together", examples of that are lacking compared to examples of siblings treating each other poorly.

Just one episode of "Growing Pains" contained behavior which one could describe as cohesive. The children are going through old storage trunks to find an object of family history for a speech assignment for Ben, and find evidence which points to their parents having been divorced. They are shocked, their parents are not home to ask about it, so they search their parents' personal effects to find clues to the story (3/17). (In the process, they not only work together, but also search their parents' bedroom, closets and Jason's professional files in his office!)

Many more episodes contained insults and putdowns. Carol has many fights with Mike, one in which she pulls his hair and kicks him. She refers to him as "armpit" as in "out of my way, armpit (1/27)," and "just slime, like every other male (1/27)." He is a "weak kneed wiener," and a "major wimp (1/20)." When Mike is in agony at the prospect of Carol skipping a grade and being a junior along with him, Carol enjoys his misery with, "Life is go-o-o-d (1/13)." In another episode, as he leaves on a date, Carol implores,

"May your date tonight be the most embarrassing event of your life (2/24)."

Carol is also bossy, does a lot of "parenting," and seems to reinforce the girl against the boys structure in this family. She patronizingly mentions to Mike that she has to hit the books--"books are those square paper things (12/2). . ." She reprimands Ben, the 10 year old, for "pigging out"(1/13) and uses a "parent" tone when she reminds Ben that he would not have had problems finding material for his family history project if he had begun thinking of it sooner (1/17).

Mike's treatment of Carol is also negative. He is a manipulative character, and is civil to Carol when he can use her. He helps Carol retrieve the books he's knocked out of her arms in order to ask her the name of the new blond girl at school (12/30). He capitalizes on their relationship as siblings when he asks her advice about how to get Robin, who has been actively pursuing him, to not like him (1/20).

Mike's insults to Carol are nearly as colorful as hers. He asserts that her new dress might be sexy enough for Bulgaria (12/30), and that she shouldn't be allowed to skip a grade because his class has already exceeded the nerd

quota (1/13). He is enormously pleased at the possible prospect of her being in trouble when he hears her paged to report to the principal's office (1/13).

His relationship with Ben is somewhat more positive. He offers some support to him, telling him "you've got to look cool and a bit dangerous" to catch girls (2/24). On the other hand, during a tense period when Mike and Carol are expecting important phone calls, he tells a caller for Ben, albeit in jest, "Ben's dead" and hangs up (1/27).

Although Ben is the youngest and doesn't seem to initiate much misery between the siblings, he does seem to enjoy the misery created by others. He hopes Carol skips a grade and "messes up Mike's whole year (1/13)." In another instance, he wants to "watch Mike suffer (1/6)." He gets Carol upset about a phone call she thinks is for her, and in disgust Carol says, "I'm gonna puke." Ben replies, "Wow, it's gonna be a fun night (1/27)!"

<u>"The Cosby Show."</u> "The Cosby Show" seems to contain somewhat more supportive behavior, proportionately, than "Growing Pains." Cohesiveness is displayed in one episode, in which three of the five siblings discuss the joys of playing "Human Cannonball." Theo and Rudy are about to

begin the horseplay which makes up the "Human Cannonball" game, and while Vanessa scolds them for doing it, warning that someone will get hurt, she delights for a moment in the memory of when she and Theo played it (2/19). This was the only example of three or more siblings sticking together.

There were several examples of supportive behavior between two siblings. Denise invites Vanessa to join her friends on a Saturday night trip to the Village, and the two of them enjoy raiding Cliff's closet to find clothes which will look extra funky (1/15). In another, Sondra asks Theo to check out her blind date for the evening (2/5).

There are also several examples of negative behavior between siblings. Theo, for example, is concerned about Vanessa's depression, but his concern is that she'll wreck the D.C. trip (12/4). In another episode, Theo is helping decorate the house for the bridal shower Denise is giving, and becomes distressed when he learns that he is not invited: "I wouldn't have helped if I didn't think there was something in it for me (2/26)"!

Quite a lot of criticism is leveled at Rudy, the youngest child. She asks Vanessa to look over a letter she has written, and Vanessa responds that, "It'll never do! It needs a salutation, heading, body, closing signature. . ."

(1/8) In another episode, Rudy asks her opinion of a report she has done. Vanessa says, "It stinks! You can be an A student or a Miss Sloppy Pig (1/22)." In yet another example, Vanessa has taken Rudy and a friend skating, and complains that it was a rotten afternoon (2/26).

Children's Relationship with Parents

"Growing Pains." While in both of these families, parents do seem to enforce certain standards of behavior, there is not very much distance between parent and child--the relationships seem informal and familiar. Some might describe the behavior as rude, impertinent, or sassy.

Mike, for example, frequently has his arm around his mother's shoulders, often when he is trying to divert attention from his behavior. On the first day of school, for example, Maggie is reminding Mike about being prepared and he puts his hand on her shoulder and says, "I know where you're going here," as if to say, we don't need this script again (10/21). Jason is reminding him about curfew and proper behavior before he and a friend go out, and he puts his arm on Maggie's shoulder, then rubs her neck telling Jason, "No need to talk to me--after the fine job you and

mom have done, I don't think there's anything to worry about (2/10)."

The lack of distance is also revealed in two conversations Mike has with others. In a conversation with his friends about the likelihood of his getting permission to go on the class ski trip, even though he is flunking English, he says, "You guys think my parents can say no to me (1/20)?" In another episode, telling Carol how he caught Maggie lying to her boss about the job conflict, he says, "I loved that look of defeat (1/6)!"

The discussion of the cocaine incident between Jason and Mike, described earlier, also exemplifies the lack of distance between parent and child.

Carol and Maggie enjoy a close, almost conspiratorial, relationship in their mutual frustration at the incompetence of men. When the parents are ill and Carol takes over the household, doing a better job than Jason has been doing, Maggie tells her to let up on the good job--that Jason just can't take it. (1/20) In the same episode, Carol tells her parents she has prepared coq au vin for dinner. Jason remarks that he made that once. In a superior tone, Carol replies, "Yeah, but I've found a new recipe."

Ben also has a familiar relationship with his parents. In the episode in which Jason goes to school at recess to help Ben work through a problem with some bullies, Jason begins to mention his own experience as a kid. Ben cuts him off with, "I know, you're gonna tell me some story. Dad, what's your point (10/21)?"

"The Cosby Show." The relationships between children and parents on "The Cosby Show" also exhibit a certain amount of familiarity, or lack of distance, although limited to the relationship with Cliff. Rudy, the youngest child, often speaks patronizingly to her father. In one episode, she uses a patronizing tone of voice to remind him to use his seat belt (1/15). In another, she comments on his singing, patting him on the shoulder, saying, "Dad, it's pretty bad (1/8)."

In the episode in which Denise invites Vanessa on a trip to the Village, the two girls rummage through Cliff's closet for funky clothes. When Vanessa is distressed that they aren't going to ask permission, Denise replies, "We're not going to ask Dad--We're just going to go into his closet and take them" (1/15).

In another episode, Theo has asked Cliff if he and Clair had any pet names for each other. Cliff tells him that Clair used to call him "Babycakes." Later in the episode, Theo addresses Cliff as "Babycakes (1/8)."

Also, the relationship between Cliff and his only son, Theo, exhibits a "conspiratorial" element very similar to that of Maggie and Carol, the only daughter, on "Growing Pains." The establishment of the Huxtable Men's Club, referred to earlier, will include eating all kinds of food that is bad for you. When Theo remarks, "But Dad, you know Mom doesn't like you eating that stuff," Cliff replies that rule number one is that what you eat is a secret. Theo says he'll keep the secret, "mon frere, mon frere (1/15)."

Discussion

This analysis gives us a picture of families in which fathers are in charge of the family life, in which there is not a great deal of distance between parents and their children, and in which siblings are not particularly supportive. Children modelling their behavior in families from these two programs would have certain expectations.

First, while it may be true that modern fathers are more nurturing than they have been in the past, it seems

unrealistic to expect that they will work at home in a job which allows them to nurture and run a household virtually full-time. Children who conclude that model fathers should do this are likely to have problems resolving the disparity between reality and television.

Second, while more mothers are employed outside the home, the number in professional positions does not parallel the television pattern. Further, in reality, those mothers still carry the major burden for household management and nurturing. Also, the television model suggests that very little time need be given to household management. On television, plumbing problems do not occur, children do not need to be driven to soccer practices or dancing lessons, and little, if any, time is spent washing dishes, or getting cars repaired.

Third, a common image of home and family is the place, where, when all else fails you, you can go and be secure and safe. The television model of home includes a set of battle lines between males and females which, in the two programs analyzed here, are clearly drawn. Further, particularly in "The Cosby Show," home includes a lot of sarcasm and put-downs. In both programs, and others of the genre, the youngest sibling is especially picked on, and siblings in

general are not supportive of each other. They do not relish each others' successes, nor lament failures.

Fourth, the television scripts which deal with child/parent relationships might lead one to ponder who is in charge in families? While attention to the issue of the disappearance of childhood includes reminders that "childhood" is a relatively recent luxury, and not a concept inherent in humankind, the discussions do not suggest that children have/or should be the ones in charge. The lack of distance between children and parents on television may provide an unrealistic model.

Thus, careful examination of two successful prime time family sitcoms which have been touted as being high quality television offer models which should give rise to some concern. One hesitates to analyze what types of interactions are portrayed on programs of low quality.

Issues for Further Analysis

Several issues deserve further analysis. One concerns the relationships between spouses. In both of these programs, a definite romantic relationship is evident between spouses, an element which was not so evident in the sitcoms of the 50's, for example.

Also, what community involvements are portrayed as being part of family life, or are families isolated entities unto themselves? Perhaps the isolation of families on television has given rise to expectations of community non-involvement, which has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. One episode of "Cosby" was notable for the fact that it did include a sense of community involvement. The episode opened with their return from church, and Clair's comments about her singing in the choir. Also, an episode of "Growing Pains" showed Jason and Maggie actively involved in a PTA meeting, an event also noteworthy for its rarity.

Another issue which deserves attention concerns the kind of behavior displayed among children and their peer groups. An episode of "Cosby" for example, showed Theo kissing his girlfriend during school in the hallway. What levels of intimacy are shown as normative in other public places? How do young people behave in school? Is school portrayed as a positive, useful place to be? Or is school life portrayed negatively?

Conclusion

Once we accept the notion that what is seen on TV is not merely mindless entertainment, and that plot lines deserve examination for elements other than their ability to

draw audiences, many serious questions arise which need attention.

It is important to consider that many audiences other than the intended audience view programs. While adults may discern the differences between television and reality, many who are still shaping their versions of social reality are likely to be influenced adversely by even the highest quality programming available.

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